



Image caption: Lisa having a little bit of fun with her Iberian Sport Horse. He is 19 in this picture, and this year (2024) he turns 24 and is still going strong – still wanting to learn and the most sure footed horse on the trail. He only recently stopped caprioling through his lead changes and whilst remaining a powerhouse he loves teaching kids

The Recipe for Longevity

Horse-friendly training

By Lisa Harders

About the Author: Lisa Harders is based in the USA and runs a horse boarding business. She has over 50 years of riding history with 40+ years training a wide variety of horses and many riders. Lisa sits on the Warlander Studbook Society Members Council and runs the Warlander Horse Association of North America. She has bred some exemplary Warlander horses which she is bringing on in their training.

Recently, I read an article about a dressage timeline to get to Grand Prix by the time the horse is eight years old. This, along with the compressed frame training methods popularized in the show ring are exactly why so many horses, advertised as ‘schoolmasters’ cannot pass a pre-purchase exam.

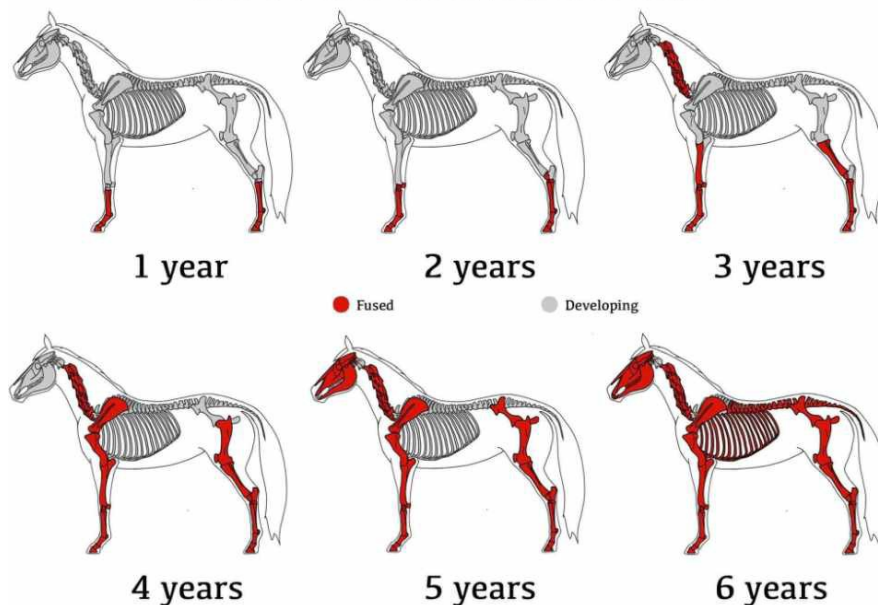
I have started thousands of young horses, and the more I do, the more I am a fan of teaching more from the ground and waiting for them to tell me when they’re ready to go on with each stage.

The horses tell us everything – we just need to learn how to listen.

And most importantly we need to understand and appreciate that a horses’ spine has not finished developing until at least six years of age.

Let me preface the following article with it is ‘extremely important’ for all horses to have plenty of turnout time. They seem to like a mix of stall and turn out. Eight to sixteen hours outside a day. I keep horses in only during ice and thunderstorms.

PROGRESSION OF EQUINE SKELETAL DEVELOPMENT



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Source: Bennett Deb, PHD, (2008)
“Timing and rate of skeletal maturation in horses”

Disclaimer: Please note these are statistical approximations, some horse types require much longer than the ages shown.

Birth to One year

These are babies. From birth to weaning, they learn how to be haltered, have their hooves handled, all about grooming, clippers, bathing and loading on trailers... all while mom is there to help teach them.

They need their moms. In nature, they would nurse until almost two years old yet we wean them as early as four months. I have completely changed my weaning process.

The foals are gradually weaned from four - eight months old. We start with play dates with the foals in a separate pasture next to the moms for a short period of time. Maybe an hour if all parties remain calm.

Then everyone is reunited for a snack. We gradually increase this time over the next 2-3 months until the foals are out for the entire turn out without moms, but reunited in the stall.

During this time, we also pull moms and foals out separately for grooming sessions, and to work moms. They can still see each other, so they are okay with the temporary separation because we have been doing it all along.

At 6-8 months, we gradually increase separation time in the barn from mom, but still within view of each other. It is so much more quiet, peaceful, and safe to do this. No hysteria, drama, or injuries.

The foals are so much more trusting, and brave.

The mare's milk has a chance to slow production down gradually, so she doesn't have a painful, swollen udder.

Once the weaning process is complete, we go for walkies. We take the youngsters out on lead lines, preferably in pairs or being ponied off a calm older horse to see the world as often as possible. They cover varied terrain, in arenas, everywhere and everywhere and also tag along to local shows. They have short trailer rides - we show them their world.

One to 3.5 years

These are toddlers to elementary school (5 - 10 year old) children.

They can start to learn skills that will be useful for their future, but it helps to make it fun. We play with balls, tarps, and other obstacles.

We are not trying to desensitize them. We are learning how they react to stimuli. We guide them to react positively and curiously with positive reinforcement for bravery.

We may introduce clicker training.

We can begin work on liberty work so when it comes time to longe, they understand our body language.

Important to note: I never use rope halters, nor do I subscribe to the 'natural horsemanship' philosophies, as they are based upon negative reinforcement and domination and create a state of learned helplessness. Horses trained like this appear to be calm and submissive however, in my experience, it is more like a shut-down robot and when they wake up - look out.

At 2-2.5 years, longeing is introduced. Just off the halter, for short periods of time - gradually increasing the time, but never over 10 minutes on each side.

They are not to just run around in circles, but are slowly educated on how to bend and balance on a circle. They learn voice commands, and walk, and trot at first. Canter is introduced when proper balance is achieved.

At 2.5-3 years tack is introduced. Each step is accepted willingly with relaxation before moving on to the next.

First there is a sacking out period to get used to blankets, saddle pads, things being flung over their back. Then the surcingle is introduced to get them used to a girth. This step can get exciting. We stay at this step until it is no longer exciting.

Next is the bridle. Before biting, we have the teeth checked for wolf teeth or anything that could cause discomfort so we start on a positive note.

When teaching a young one to accept the bit, I use treats. I'm short in stature, and have found this method is magic for getting horses to practically bridle themselves.

We now start taking the horses on walks with the bridle where they learn organically to accept the bit in an activity they are familiar with.

Gradually, we get closer to the position of holding the reins that we will be from the saddle.

We combine these exercises weekly, to give the horse variety and fun.

At three years of age, we will begin longeing off the bridle. We 'never' tie the horse's head to its chest in any way. We connect an outside side rein set towards the top of the surcingle, adjusted to have a soft contact in the horse's natural posture. This allows them to learn to go to the outside rein for support, but does not in any way force a head position.

The longe is slipped through the bit and attached to the surcingle on the same height ring as the side rein. This would be close to the placement of the rider's hands. In this way, there is some give and take on the inside rein, and from the in hand lessons, the horse will have a basic understanding of giving to the pressure.

We can now start developing the young horses' connection over their backs to help them be stronger and more prepared to carry a rider.

We may add stimuli such as balloons, or sacks to the surcingle to gauge their reaction to having a rider and again, to guide them through positive reinforcement to be brave, and accept these new lessons. By this time, they are generally uneventful lessons.

Once the horse is accepting of the work, it continues until the muscles of the back and back end show sufficient development to carry a rider.

We longe these horses only two times per week as two year olds and three times per week as three year olds - maximum. We do ground work an additional one to two times per week.

3.5 - Five years

Some horses will be ready to back lightly with a light, well balanced rider that has a good strong two-point position at 3.5 years.

We begin the process by introducing the saddle. Generally this is uneventful due to the preparation work leading up to this point.

I use composite stirrups so they can flop around on the horse without hurting them - keeping the horse at this stage until relaxed.

Then the bridle is added, the outside side rein, and inside sliding longe line attached to the 'D' rings of the saddle. Once warmed up, not tired, the first backing session is just standing at the mounting block while:

1. Rider climbs up and down the mounting block, noisy, and quietly. Ground person is holding horse, and giving positive reinforcement for appropriate response of standing quietly. Once horse is relaxed;
2. Rider puts foot in stirrup. Once relaxed jumps up and down a bit with foot in stirrup. Again relaxation before...
3. Rider puts weight in stirrup and leans into horse, lying across saddle. Horse relaxes, and we take a few steps. Rider is prepared to slide off should horse show signs of discomfort or fear such as bucking or rearing. This almost never happens due to the method, but when it does there is often a physical issue that needs resolution before continuing. We do accomplish this stage before stopping though to keep horse from thinking bucking or rearing are appropriate responses. If horse accepts this stage;
4. Rider swings leg over, staying close to the neck, and not putting weight in saddle, but rather picking up other stirrup and remaining in a folded two point until the horse relaxes. Gradually the rider lifts upper body and gets to a half seat, or light seat. The horse is okay with this then;
5. We go for walkies. The rider gives soft cues as ground person leads so the horse associates cues for walk, halt, and turns. That's it. First ride done

Each subsequent ride increases time and difficulty. First on the longe, asking for and going with trot. Then off the longe, building balance at the walk and trot, always encouraging forward and staying in a light seat, posting the trot.

Let the first canters come from pushing the trot a little more and a little more.

Then add lateral work and refine the canter aids. These lessons are interspersed with rides out with older horses, and eventually alone.

The horse is ridden forward into a soft contact, not asked for any head position.

The frame happens from the horse finding its balance and connection over the back just as it did in all the lessons before the rider.

The horse will develop soundly and confidently in this manner. And it is usually in the five year old year that horses really find their strength.

Until they show you they are ready and they lift and engage their bodies as they move off from the mounting block, they are 'not' ready for more than these basics.

There are lots to do during this time - transitions, school figures, work on varied terrain, return to ground work to learn new things, maybe pop over some cavaletti or low jumps or a few logs here and there.

Use poles and cavaletti both longeing and under saddle to develop suspension, rhythm, strength, coordination, and make it fun.

Importantly, stay light in the seat until you feel the horse's back lift you up. Always think of riding to make a space you want the horse to fill in - that can be postural, or directional.

Never punish forward - even if it scares you. Going faster needs to be seen as volunteer work. Control yourself and your body and the early lessons will have the horses seeking to stay with you.

It is beneficial to give your youngsters a rest from riding when they are in a growth phase and built a bit downhill until the front end catches up.

Alternatively, many people give a horse a start so they are walking trotting and cantering under saddle and then let them just finish growing.

This is where it's good to know your horses. Some thrive on the mental stimulation so keeping up with the ground exercises and longeing is beneficial...

however, never lose sight of the fact that their spine is not fully developed.

Some horses are still very babyish at this stage and awkward so need time to just finish maturing.

Five - 15 years

This is your horse's prime of life. Go places, do things, compete if you want.

Steadily work through the levels of your chosen sport. But 'always' listen to your horse and wait until he is 100% confident and relaxed at each level before moving on to the next.

Always compete at a level down from what you are working on at home. In this manner, you will have a horse that will give you many years of enjoyment and a partnership like you read about in story books.

There are three very important things to always consider in your horses life. These three things can keep your horses healthy, sound and only require the vet for routine vaccinations and there will be little need for visits from the physiotherapist or body workers.

NUTRITION

Is vitally important. Forage should always come first, and should balance vitamins, minerals, and fatty acids. Avoiding soy can be difficult but is highly recommended. I have created a feed for these horses that has proven beneficial to all types of horses.

www.optimus-equine-feed.com

It is not currently available everywhere but I would love to change that. As soon as I can find someone to do 25lb bags I will put it on Amazon.

HOOF BALANCE AND HOOF CARE

Will go a long way in preventing lameness.

Medial lateral imbalances wear away at the joints. Long toes with low heels make it like walking in flippers to the horse. A well balanced hoof can go barefoot on any horse. That's right any horse. Horses are not born with shoes. They can be barefoot.

On some horses with pared away soles it may take a while, but balanced hooves can be and do better and stay healthier long term barefoot.

www.hoofrehab.com for more information

SADDLE FIT

Don't buy a saddle because it's pretty or it's what the trainer

gets a kick back for. Many saddles are made to appeal to the desire to have bling, but they often are not good for the horses.

Our Warlander horses, Friesians and Iberians have very pronounced cervical trapezius muscles that are extremely sensitive to pressure from tree points on the saddle.

I personally love George Gullickson's designs because the gullets are infinitely adjustable and they shape to the horse all the way down midway to the elbow, taking that point pressure off of this muscle group and allowing them to lift the forehand easier and more comfortably.

They require a great deal of patience to wait for if you order full custom, but are well worth the wait.

If others have this design, it's worth looking into. Most do not.

Senior Horses

As seniors, the horses no longer need to be drilled - they know their job.

They are great at teaching and are wonderful to have a relaxing ride.

And if you follow these guidelines they will be sound and working possibly to 30 or older.

Be patient with your horses. There is plenty of time.



This is my mare 'Annie' who lived to be 32; and this was us showing on her 30th birthday.



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Society 2024